DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 125 SO 032 768

AUTHOR	Wiltse, Lynne
TITLE	Exploring a Community of Practice Perspective: Language, Gender and Ethnicity in a Multicultural Junior High Classroom.
PUB DATE	2001-04-00
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Research; *Cultural Pluralism; *Diversity (Student); Ethnicity; Ethnography; Foreign Countries; Gender Issues; Grade 9; Inner City; *Interpersonal Relationship; Junior High Schools; Language Arts; Language Role; *Sociocultural Patterns
IDENTIFIERS	Canada; *Learning Environments

ABSTRACT

This study considered the sociocultural nature of learning for students in a multicultural classroom setting, specifically investigating student-student and student-teacher relationships in a junior high classroom using a "community of practice" perspective. This framework was chosen to determine what contribution a community of practice analysis can make to the study of social interaction in a classroom setting. The study focused on the experiences of students and teacher over one year in a grade 9 language arts classroom at a Canadian inner city elementary-junior high school. The school was ethnically and linguistically diverse and a large number of students spoke English as a second language (ESL), although they were integrated into mainstream classes. Data sources included participant observation, contextual field notes, transcripts from semi-structured interviews, and samples of student writing. Although second language learning was important for "outsiders" becoming "insiders," the linguistic profiles and language learning needs of ESL students are not easily understood in terms of fixed concepts of ethnicity and language. At the research site, issues of ethnicity and gender surfaced as more prominent than those related to second language learning. (Contains 23 references.) (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 453 125

AERA

Seattle, 2001

EXPLORING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE: LANGUAGE, GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN A MULTICULTURAL JUNIOR HIGH CLASSROOM

by

Lynne Wiltse

Lynne Wiltse

Faculty of Education

University of Alberta

Edmonton, AB

lwiltse@ualberta.ca

SO 032 768

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Exploring a Community of Practice Perspective: Language, Gender and Ethnicity in a Multicultural Junior High Classroom

Introduction

This paper describes findings of research which consider the sociocultural nature of learning for students in a multicultural classroom setting. I agree with Cummins (1996, 1-2) that "human relationships are at the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any method for teaching literacy, or science or math." Given that, the purpose of my study was to investigate student-student and student-teacher relationships in a junior high classroom, using a 'community of practice' perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991). I chose this framework, which focuses on the situated and social nature of learning, in order to determine what contribution a community of practice analysis can make to the study of social interaction in a classroom setting.

The study focuses on the experiences of students and teacher in a grade nine language arts classroom at a Canadian inner-city elementary-junior high school. The school that participated in this study was ethnically and linguistically diverse and a large number of students spoke English as a second language (ESL). ESL students at this school were integrated into mainstream classes, although the community coordinator who spoke several Asian languages provided recent immigrants with support. Approximately 75% of the students in the school were of Asian heritage (Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Chinese in order of population concentration). First Nations students comprised an additional 15% of the student population, and the remaining 10% were from diverse backgrounds. As tensions existed between various ethno-cultural groups in the neighborhood, school staff were working on various initiatives to improve relations between the different cultural groups in the school.

The following research questions framed my study: How do social relations facilitate or constrain participation of classroom members? How does the social structure of the classroom community define possibilities for student learning? What is the role of the teacher in promoting integration among students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

Theoretical Framework

My research is embedded in a theoretical framework based on the concepts of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). From these perspectives, learning entails a shift away

from the traditional focus on individual learners to an emphasis on their shared membership in the community. A community of practice is defined as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Legitimate peripheral participation concerns the process by which newcomers move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that the social structure of the community of practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e. for legitimate peripheral participation). In the classroom I observed, I examined participants (including myself) as members of overlapping communities of practice.

Toohey, Waterstone, and Jule-Lemke (2000) note that the pivotal role of social interaction in learning has been well formulated by sociocultural researchers, including Vygotsky (1978), Rogoff (1994) and McDermott (1993). Similarly, Lave and Wenger situate learning in certain forms of social coparticipation, asking what kinds of social engagements provide contexts for learning to take place (Hanks, 1991). Their framework is based on the notion that all significant human activity is situated in real-world contexts—it takes as a starting point the cultural and social-practice nature of significant learned experience (Atkinson, 1997). The communities of practice perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) has been explored in various research contexts (Mosenthal, 1996; Stairs, 1996). Of particular relevance to my research context, though, is its application to second language research (Haneda, 1997; Toohey, 1996, 1998, 2000; Wolfe and Faltis, 1999) and to language and gender research (Bergvall, 1999; Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The communities of practice approach enables researchers of socially situated language use to view language within the context of social practice. Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999) suggest that the concept of a community of practice is dynamic, rich and complex—it emphasizes the notion of 'practice' as central to an understanding of why the concept offers something different to researchers than the traditional term 'community.'

Methodology

Research for this ethnographic case study was conducted in a multicultural grade nine language arts classroom over the course of one school year. Data sources included participant observation of classroom student-teacher and student-student interaction, contextual field notes, transcripts from audiotaped semi-structured interviews and samples of student writing. I visited the classroom on a twice weekly basis, observing the students in various contexts, from individual work to group projects. After several months in the classroom, I interviewed eleven students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Among other questions, students were asked about: learning English (for the ESL students); attending a multicultural school; relationships with peers and teachers; school work; and life out-of-school. Each student was interviewed a second time. The language arts teacher as well as two other grade nine teachers, a student teacher, the school community coordinator, and the principal were also interviewed. In addition to the interviews, I had informal discussions with the students and the classroom teacher on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the study. All the interviews were then transcribed and the data analyzed. Research participants have been provided with pseudonyms.

Results

I found the community of practice perspective both a fruitful and fascinating framework for examining social relations in my research site, at times in ways other than what I had expected. Like Toohey (1996, 1998, 2000), I had begun my study intending to investigate the ESL students in the classroom as newcomers beginning to participate in the practices of a particular community. And, while this was possible and to a degree, productive, it became clear that conceptualizing second language learning as a process of moving from being an outsider to an insider was too simplistic. Second language learning (while important) was not the most prominent aspect of school experience—these youths were involved in identity construction and negotiation. In their study of young adolescent students in multiethnic urban England, Leung, Harris and Rampton (1997) argue that, due to demographic and social changes, the assumption that ESL students are linguistic and social outsiders and that there is a neat one-to-one correspondence between ethnicity and language is inadequate. Rather, the linguistic profiles and language learning needs of ESL students are not easily understood in terms of fixed concepts of ethnicity and language. This was certainly the case in my research site, where issues of ethnicity and gender surfaced as more prominent than those related to second language learning. In this regard, Lave and Wenger's framework helped to illuminate how ethnicity and gender were constructed in the social practices of the classroom.

Ethnicity

The practice in this classroom community appeared to be to position the non-Asian students as the newcomers. Not only were the Asian students in the majority, they also constituted a stable population, in particular the Cambodian students—most had attended the school since kindergarten, while the Caucasian and First Nations students were more transient. For the most part, the non-Asian students were those who felt like outsiders and faced constraints to full participation in the classroom community.

An incident that happened in the language arts class one day serves as an illustration. As part of an assignment for an oral communication unit, each student had to give a prepared speech in front of the class. As no one was volunteering, the teacher, Ms. Harris, was having students take turns according to their birthday. When she didn't know who was next, Ms. Harris would ask and the students would tell her. After she had been told a few birthdays, she announced to the class, "that's what I like about this community—you all know each other so well. If it's your month, I know someone will tell me." Interested in her choice of the word community, I decided to explore this comment with the students during the interviews. The Asian students interviewed said that they agreed with the teacher's comment, explaining that they had known each other for a long time and that they live close to each other. However, when I asked Adrena, a Caucasian student, who had joined the class part way through the year, her response pointed to a very different experience: "Nobody knows who I am or when my birthday is." Ms. Harris described the class as

> incredibly close-knit. It's so important to a teenager to have a sense of belonging and I think the Cambodian and Vietnamese kids feel like they belong whereas it's the opposite for the white and Native kids. They don't feel they belong. Newcomers have a hard time breaking in.

Another teacher, Mr. Linden, explained that

> they've been together, a lot of them, so long. Time makes them a community. They have formed tight friendships that are based over years of being together, but they see most of our European or Native background students come and go, and so, the newcomers have trouble breaking into the family. All newcomers—it doesn't matter what their background—are treated the same. It's those that stay that tend to do better.

When asked about the 'newcomers', the Asian students reported that: "It's hard for us to talk to them." "It's weird for us." "I'm with my friends and don't notice them." Cary, a student of Vietnamese heritage who had attended the school since kindergarten, said that the way things were seemed "normal", but that "when you go to other schools, it feels weird cause like there's not so much people who are, not English, but Oriental. Somehow I feel that they're looking down on us." Adrena knows what that feels like. She told me that on her first day of school, she "felt like a white outcast in a white society." Positions are reversed, when the (usual) 'majority' becomes the 'minority'.

Mr. Linden saw personality as another factor in the way newcomers were treated. In his opinion, newcomers who had a similar personality to the Asian students would have a better chance of fitting into the community:

> And the students who stay here and show a similar type of personality as the Asians—you know, a little more relaxed, quieter, not showy—they start to be drawn into the group. Culturally, the Cambodians are a quieter people. In their cultural background, someone who's loud and boisterous and individualistic is frowned on.

While I am concerned about the danger of stereotyping that accompanies such generalizations, I could not help but notice that during the course of my observations of classroom practices, there was something to Mr. Linden's comments about "a quieter people." I began the research project very interested in observing classroom dialogue. However, I found that while there was much student-student interaction (especially along ethnic and gender lines), the Asian students were very hesitant to speak up in class or ask for teacher help. Ms. Harris told me that getting these students to talk was "like pulling teeth." She attributed this to cultural factors: "They're taught to respect their elders, and that you don't talk, you don't ask questions. Yet in my culture it's the opposite, you need to ask questions." Once again, Adrena proved to be the exception:

> And like, nobody speaks up, and they laugh when I do. They don't ask questions, they're confused, they wait till the assignment's due, and then, they're like, I didn't get it done 'cause I don't understand it. I'm sorry, I want to learn. I ask interrogative questions. I want to get the best of my education, like, I need to know this material.

Mr. Linden agreed that getting them to talk was "like pulling teeth." because

> it's showing individualism. It's coming out and breaking away from the community, and that's just not part of their cultural background. They're very communal, you know—community's important. It is a tough task to get them to show individualism.

The cultural implications, however, were lost on Adrena: "They're like puppets. They do what their friends want." Not only did this silence affect student progress, in turn, it shaped the teachers' practice. Over time, Ms. Harris found herself avoiding activities involving class discussions, although this had been her preferred teaching style:

> It sort of turns you off from wanting to start any group discussion for fear of standing up there going, "all right, you know, somebody say something." And, that's where I notice I've changed as a teacher from my previous schools to here, where we'd get discussions going, and it would be really fun. Here, I do more of just avoiding the whole issue, although it's something, you know, that probably should be practiced more.

Whereas Ms. Harris dealt with this by avoidance, Mr. Linden chose compromise:

> I have them do little things to keep trying to make it comfortable, things they can do quickly, things they can do decently and do well. So, it's slowly

> getting better. I just keep picking away at it. It's something you can't change overnight.

Gender issues in the classroom also proved to be "something you can't change overnight."

Gender Differences and Divisions

Bergvall (1999) considers that the community of practice perspective works particularly well to explain the construction and enactment of gender in studies of adolescents in school. An example can be found in Bucholtz's (1999) study of language and identity practices in a community of 'nerd girls'—this is "precisely the kind of setting for which C of P was designed, in which learners or novices apprentice themselves to (or resist) the acquisition of gender and other norms—in short, education" (Bergvall, 1999, p. 279). This applies to the classroom community I studied as well. I noticed many gender divisions and differences—for example, boys and girls interacted only when pushed to by the teacher, and gender roles seemed to be quite strictly defined.

During the interviews, I asked the students about the classroom practices regarding gender. The responses in general suggested that this was a sensitive topic, although girls and boys responded in contrasting ways. The girls were of the opinion that the divisions were imposed by the boys. Adrena was sarcastic with "God forbid you sit by a girl!" Another mocking comment was, "The boys are afraid we'll spit poison at them!" The boys, on the other hand, seemed to find this practice natural, attributing the divisions to puberty, not something they had control over: "We're at a sensitive age. We're too shy to talk to each other." "We're a different sex—afraid to talk to each other."

Differences regarding schoolwork were also noted, with the following comments summarizing typical gendered practices regarding schoolwork:

> The girls work harder; they take more pride in their work. The boys just do it to get it done. It's not cool. (teacher)

> Girls want to get their work done, the guys just want to fool around. (male student)

> The boys are smart, but they don't try because it's uncool. (female student)

The girls tended to focus on academics, while the boys were more interested in sports. In this regard, parallels could be drawn to Hubbard's (1999) study concerning gendered strategies for success among low-income African American high school students. Hubbard found that while the men pursued athletics as the key to a secure future, the African American females in the study relied on academics and peer support. In my research site, the teachers were inclined to attribute these differences to ethno-cultural factors, while students were of the view that teachers treated boys and girls differently.

> The gender differences are culturally based—it's the home influence. (teacher)
>
> The girls get praise for getting their work done; the boys get praise for sports. (female student)
>
> Teachers trust the girls more because they work hard. In sports, the guys are usually picked to be the leaders. (male student)

Like Hubbard, I learned "the benefit of examining the interrelatedness of ethnicity, class, and gender when attempting to understand the ways in which academic success is constructed" (p. 363). In Hubbard's study, it was found that the African American females worried about the economic dilemmas they would face if they did not get higher education. A similar situation existed with the minority girls in my study. Mr. Linden explained that

> for the Asian girls, education is a huge tool for them. It gives them an even footing with the guys from their cultural background. Also, as being educated, it may even put them on a higher platform, in a way, than the guys. It's a chance to beat the guys, and get ahead of them. The guys just see it as something that has to be done. They don't see education as a chance of opening doors for them, whereas I think the girls understand that a little better, that it's a chance to open doors.

During the interviews, all the boys told me that they considered education to be important—for their future career, for getting a good job, for getting into university, for making it far in life. However, this belief did not seem to translate into practice. More than that, according to the teachers, the boys actually felt that the girls needed more education because they were not as smart. Ms. Harris told me that one of the boys in class had explained that "the girls need their education, because they have to try and smarten up to get as smart as a man. The boys already have smarts, so they'll be fine—they'll just work and make money." However, she saw a contradiction in the boy's thinking.

> If you look at it, those girls are going to get some good jobs. Those guys are not going to have any job, or some menial labour job because their marks aren't going to get them into post secondary, whereas the girls marks are. And, they don't see that. They think that they can sit around and do nothing, while the girls do all the work. Yet, when they talk about their family life, the man should be out working, and the girls should be at home taking care of the kids. So, I'm saying, how are you going to do that when you don't have a good education? You know, they have it all backwards.

Mr. Linden had encountered this attitude, too:

> Their parents come from a cultural background that says that men are the chiefs, the heads of the family, and they're the ones with the brains. The woman does the work at home, and she should be quiet.

In Cary's words: "My mom always taught me that cause you're a girl you're supposed to do this and that—like, family first, then schoolwork, don't talk to my friends a lot, listen, do my homework."

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, p. 466) note that, with the concept of communities of practice, gender researchers can more fruitfully focus on "people's active engagement in the reproduction of or resistance to gender arrangements in their communities." Clearly, in this community of practice, as can be seen from the examples above, the majority of the students were actively engaging in the reproduction of gender arrangements; however, there were students who resisted these (and other) classroom norms. One boy in the class, Phan, resisted the characteristic practice for males in the classroom regarding schoolwork. In the interview he explained: "I like good grades, they (the other guys) like sports." Ms. Harris made the following remark about Phan's choice:

> There's also a long history in the school that it's not cool to do a good job. You look at someone like Phan and you admire him because he's stood above that and said, "well, I don't want to have a $6 an hour job. I want to do something with my life."

Phan told me that his goal is to be a scientist. Adrena was another student who resisted the classroom norms—in her case, the resistance was very much intentional.

> There is so much pressure to be this or that in this school. It's way easier to break out of boxes here because everybody expects you to be a certain way.

Adrena made a conscious effort to "break out of boxes"; examples of her acts of resistance included speaking up in class, arguing with boys, wearing provocative clothing, and choosing to be a traditionally male character (knight) during a medieval unit when they had to design and wear a costume. Interestingly, while Phan's resistance to classroom norms appeared to be accepted, Adrena's was not. I wondered how much of this was because Adrena was a newcomer, while Phan, of Vietnamese heritage, had been at the school since kindergarten. Mr. Linden considered Adrena's personality to be a significant reason for her non-acceptance into the community: "She's having a tough time. She's a loud girl. She's blunt. To fit in, she needs to be less boisterous, to have more of a relaxed demeanor." Adrena went against the classroom practices for the way girls should behave—it was fine for boys to be boisterous. Furthermore, in these practices, the construction of gender cannot be separated from that of ethnicity. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, p. 472) note that researchers need to focus on gender in its full complexity, instead of abstracting gender from social practice. Adrena's comment provides an example:

> On my first day of school someone told me the guys here wouldn't be attracted to me because I'm white. Do they see me as female or white or both? The Cambodian guys think they're the best. But, I feel sorry for them.

Adrena, accustomed to attending schools in which Caucasian students were the majority, found that she was offered a very different identity at this school. "Becoming a member of a community of practice is a process of developing a particular identity and mode of behaviour; through participation in a community's sociocultural practices, members learn which discourses and forms of participation are valued and not valued by the community" (Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson, 1995, p. 448). Adrena was certainly learning what ways of being were valued by this particular community. Commenting on how identity positions would change the following year when the students left this community for high school, Ms. Harris contrasted Adrena with Saran (the most boisterous of the Cambodian boys): "This year Saran is cool, he's the man. Next year Adrena will flower and Saran will shrivel up." Whether or not this will prove to be accurate, clearly, identity is complex and dynamic, rather than fixed. The students, socially situated, must negotiate multiple, and often contradictory, identities.

Educational Significance

I found the community of practice analysis very useful for examining the social nature of learning in a classroom setting—it helped to illuminate some of the complexities of classroom practices and provided an avenue to investigate identity. Bergvall (1999, p. 288) argues that "we need more studies of local communities of practice: of the local co-construction sites where individuals wrestle with, and challenge, the definitions and the integration of the different aspects of their lives within their communities". The value of the communities of practice framework is that it encourages researchers to focus on the local practices of particular communities, thereby helping investigators avoid generalizations about social categories such as class, ethnicity and gender. My study highlights the importance of this and suggests that further research that utilizes a community of practice perspective to examine social relations and identity practices in multicultural classrooms would be helpful in deepening our understanding of these contexts.

References

Atkinson, D. (1997). A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(1), 71-94.

Bergvall, V. (1999) Toward a comprehensive theory of language and gender. *Language in Society*, 28(2), 273-293.

Bucholtz, M. (1999) "Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society*, 28(2), 203-223.

Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992) Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, 461-90.

Gutierrez, K., Rymes, B. & Larson, J. (1995). Script, counterscript, and underlife in the classroom: James Brown vs. Brown and Board of Education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65 (3), 445-471.

Haneda, M. (1997). Second language learning in a 'community of practice': A case study of adult Japanese learners. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 54(1), 11-27.

Hanks, W. (1991) Forward. In J. Lave & E. Wenger, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (pp. 13-24). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holmes, J. & Meyerhoff, M. (1999) The Community of Practice: Theories and methodologies in language and gender research. *Language in Society*, 28(2), 173-183.

Hubbard, L. (1999) College aspirations among low-income African American high school students: Gendered strategies for success. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 30(3), 363- 383.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leung, C., Harris, R. & Rampton, B. (1997). The idealised native speaker, reified ethnicities, and classroom realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 543-561.

McDermott, R. (1993) "The acquisition of a child by a learning disability", in S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on activity and context*. (pp. 269-305.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mosenthal, J. (1996) Situated learning and methods coursework in the teaching of literacy. *Journal of Literacy Research* 28(3), 379-403.

Rogoff, B. (1994) Developing understanding of the idea of the community of learners. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 1, 209-229.

Stairs, A. (1996). Human development as cultural negotiation: Indigenous lessons on becoming a teacher. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 30(3), 219-237.

Toohey, K. (1996). Learning English as a second language in kindergarten: A community of practice perspective. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 52(4), 49-576.

Toohey, K. (1998). "Breaking them up, taking them away": ESL students in Grade 1. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 61-84.

Toohey, K. (2000) *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Toohey, K., Waterstone, B. & Jule-Lemke, A. (2000) Community of Learners, Carnival, and Participation in a Punjabi Sikh Classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56(3), 421-436.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, and E. Souberman, (eds.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolfe, P & Faltis, C. (1999) Gender and ideology in secondary ESL and bilingual programs. In C. Faltis & P. Wolfe (eds.) *So much to say: Adolescents, bilingualism, & ESL in the secondary school* (pp. 83-102). New York: Teachers College Press.